Mobile Gameplay and Engendering Openness to Alternative Perspectives in Jewish History

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Please note: portions of this memo have been created with dictation software. This may introduce orthographic errors and typos.

• Nature of the Project

This chapter reports on design-based research (see Methods) on a mobile place–based GPS augmented reality game to teach modern Jewish history. It concentrates on the development of new design knowledge for Jewish history educators and designers creating such digital interactive learning experiences. In particular, it concentrates on design iterations focused on enhancing learner openness to hearing, listening to, and being able to articulate perspectives of historical figures with whom they may strongly disagree. The researcher made design changes in successive versions of the game, drawing on data gathering and analysis, and working towards outcomes in which learners were eventually able to articulate points of view of largely unsympathetic historical figures. The latest, and finally successful iteration involved having digital characters echo back opposing viewpoints and carefully pacing “on rails” moments in which the player’s own choices were temporarily out of their control.

The game, entitled Jewish Time Jump: New York, is an historical time travel game in which learners play time traveling journalists. They “land” on the eve of the Uprising of 20,000, the largest women-led strike in U.S. history. Learners play on location in and around Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village, New York. Using their iOS devices (iPhones and iPads), they interact with digital characters on a quest to deliver a story to their editor at the fictional Jewish Time Jump Gazette. They are accompanied by the character of their time travel device, Hank The Chronometer, as they interact with digital characters, view digital versions of primary source material, and receive images from over 100 years in the past, triggered by their GPS location.

The game tasks the players with hearing a variety of perspectives – from workers, labor organizers (such as Rose Schneiderman, Clara Lemlich, and Fannia Cohn of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union), factory owners (Max Blanck and Isaac Harris), and other characters drawn from history. Learners receive and read digitized newspaper articles in English and in Yiddish with English translation. Players can change their digital “garb” which alters
gameplay. For example, if players are dressed as workers, they might get attacked by shtarkers, tough guys who were hired by factor owners to beat up strikers. Dressing as a boss could allow them behind the closed doors of the Manufacturers Association. Learners are on site of the building that was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory during the concluding chapter of the game, which takes place in 1911 and includes being “on site” on the day of the fire. Finally players return to the present. Back in the present, they meet contemporary figures in New York including a rabbi whose great grandmother survived the fire and a contemporary Jewish business consultant discussing labor issues.

**Jewish History, Tikkun Olam, and Civic Education**

The research and design of this game for learning is premised on a belief in the importance of an interconnection between contemporary understandings of Jewish history, *tikkun olam* education for Jewish youth and the pedagogies of civic education. Case in point is the design aim to elicit a “best case, fair hearing”\(^1\) of alternative perspectives. By “best case, fair hearing” I am referring to the idea in civic education that multiple perspectives should be heard out and understood. This is related to Barton and Levstik’s understanding of history education’s purpose as preparing learners to be informed citizens in a pluralist democracy.\(^2\) Here, I tie Jewish history to history as taught through civic education and contemporary *tikkun olam* education. This work aligns with concerns of Jacobs\(^3\), and requires contemporary understandings of *tikkun olam* (see Krasner\(^4\)).

**Listening To and Perhaps Understanding the Bad Guys**

Hasia Diner’s (2011) article “The Jewish Bosses Were Exploiters — and Role Models”\(^5\) on Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, was an important source for addressing design challenges regarding providing a “best case, fair hearing” for the factory owners. Though they were exploiting workers, and clearly responsible for horrors, they too had been immigrants, coming up through the garment trade in even more harsh

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circumstances, with tuberculosis-filled sweatshops. Competition was fierce. Merely casting the owners as villains covers over the complexity of the relationships between the owners and workers.

Early iterations of the game suggested that the learners read the bosses as villains, and more importantly, were unable or unwilling to articulate the perspectives of the bosses, even after learning of their backgrounds. But how, through design alterations, could 5th-7th grade learners come to at least articulate the perspective of the owners? This was the subject of a number of successive iterations and field test-plays. Through case analysis of these iterations, the chapter will describe design challenges, learning theory, and field data upon which design decisions were developed, and resulting demonstrations of learner behavior. This work is a series of very specific changes to an interactive learning environment, tested over a number of contexts. The results will be of use to those seeking to use interactive or role playing environments for teaching Jewish history and suggest novel approaches for providing a best case, fair hearing to opposing perspectives in history education.

• Anticipated Argument/Theme

  Terminology: Non-player characters (NPCs) are always outside of the direct control of the player, though the player’s actions may influence them. The player-character (PC) is often but not always in the control of the player. In “on-rails” moments, the game exerts influence/control over the player.

  Key takeaways regarding promoting a best case, fair hearing of an opposing viewpoint include the specific use of dramatic frames and emotional reactions of the NPC to the PC as well as carefully paced on-rails sequences for the PC. These frames, reactions and progressions, such as the NPC echoing the bias of the PC and carefully pacing on-rails moments were designed in order to reinforce learner identification with a reporter (read: historian) role, such that the players may be made more aware of a responsibility to understand a perspective while not necessarily agreeing with or condoning it. Important corollaries include methods for ensuring player access to events within a sprawling place-based narrative with many events and characters but limited play/class time. The latest iteration lead to players expressing the heretofore ignored perspective as well as fewer instances of confusion.

• Methods
This study uses methods under the umbrella known as Design-Based Research (DBR). DBR is suited for any “rich contextualized setting in which people have agency.” DBR is an iterative, proto-theory-testing approach to developing learning theory and design knowledge. In the case of this study, this meant the creation of a digital prototype based on learning theory. Then the researcher took learners and educators out into the field with the prototype and gathered data using a variety of relevant methods. The data included pre and post-surveys, participant observation (including video and audio recording) of the before, during, and after-play processes, and computer log data which recorded each move each player made in the game along with the GPS location and time stamp. After each play session, the researcher analyzed the data, returned to learning and design theory, and then made alterations to the game with the design focused on working learner outcomes closer to the learning goals. Each re-design, data gathering, data analysis, and re-theorization is considered an iteration. The iterations are meant to spiral towards both improved learner outcomes, new design knowledge, and micro-learning theory advances.

Another way to articulate the target outcome of DBR is design-relevant social science. Edelson delineates three types of theory that can be developed through design research: domain theories, design frameworks, and design methodologies. Other forms developed in DBR include design patterns, design stages, design roles, design values, and design principles.

Design-based research is particularly appropriate for a study involving design and field play in digital games because it “blends empirical educational research with the theory-driven design of learning environments [and] is an important methodology for understanding how, when, and why educational innovations work in practice.” It is especially useful in researching novel teaching environments and for developing contextualized theories of teaching and learning.

**Contributions to the Field**

This work is applicable to historical games and simulations using narratives, especially, but not limited to place-based events. Given the ability of learners to eventually articulate perspectives not articulated in early iterations, it is possible that this research could lead to modes

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of nurturing a wider variety of fair hearings of opposing perspectives, and lead to more complex understandings of figures in history. Diner’s charge to understand the bosses in a more complex way may well be possible with learners as young as 5th-7th grade, provided the right in-game frames and NPC responses.

**Questions for Further Consideration: Granularity**

The interactive narrative solution to the problem of learners not articulating the bosses’ perspective centered on what I call “bias-mirroring,” meaning that the boss NPC at a certain point, will not listen to the player despite player pleas and demonstrates prejudice against the player. Here, bias mirroring is a term standing in for a narrative solution built of at least three more granular elements. These elements are: a) mirroring player bias against the boss, by having the boss make prejudicial and incorrect assumptions about the player’s identity (mistaking them for a striking worker as opposed to a reporter) b) logically pacing the “on rails” moments in which the player dialogue is scripted, so that the player may accept a gentle push towards being open minded: In this case the example was the player being forced to say, “I’m not a striker, I’m a [reporter],” before the boss character cuts them off. And c), the subsequent frame by the narrator character after the boss NPC leaves without answering the player’s questions. Here the narrator points out that they player did not have the boss character’s trust and would have to gain it to get information from the boss.

As a cluster, this approached elicited responses closest to the learning goals. Further research could work to unpack these three factors in order to determine their inter-relationship, if any, and responses elicited without the full cluster. Because of the nature of the large scale of such a game, the granularity of change is difficult to assess.

I would be curious to hear scholars’ perspectives on these three elements of an interactive history narrative: a character mirroring the prejudice of a player/learner, the player being guided/forced (in an on rails moment) to assert their unbiased identity, and a direction to gain the character’s trust after the interaction. Together, these led to students recounting the boss’ story, separately, their function is yet to be explored.

**Memo Bibliography**


